Identifying Arguments in Visual Media

Many people love going to the movies. Films, movies, provide images that thrill us, frighten us, or that can even make us cry. But films also present arguments or try to persuade us to adopt certain beliefs. Visual arguments in film can be made via camera angles, editing, settings, etc. Critical analysis will allow us to interpret what a film is trying to say to us; what particular ideas it is trying to persuade us to adopt. Since most films have a plot, cinematography, characters, themes, settings, etc; looking more closely at these elements will help in a critical analysis.

The first element of a film that is worth exploring is the plot. If we can determine what happened and what did not happen, then we may discover how the plot steers us to think something in particular. By examining whether specific things were highlighted by the camera angles used, allows an additional glance of what is considered important for us to see. The setting used can often reveal a filmmakers attitude to things.

Example: The film The Life of David Gale portrays a professor who wants to make the death penalty illegal. The professor is convicted of murdering a colleague. However, it turns out that the professor did not kill the colleague: a video of the colleague committing suicide and the professor filming the suicide is shown at the end of the film. Despite the professor's innocence, he is executed and goes to death to prove his point that the death penalty can be applied to the innocent.

The general consensus is that this film argues against the death penalty. It offers evidence within the plot that innocent people can be convicted of crimes and sentenced to death. But, in the editing even more is revealed. Images change quickly back and for the between the professor's execution and the video revealing the truth of the matter. They seem to offer an argument by comparison that emphasizes the professor's innocence and perhaps the wastefulness of both deaths. This could be seen as an appeal to pathos or ethos in an attempt to provoke emotional outrage in the viewer at the injustice of the death penalty.